

### The Uncanny: How Cultural Trauma Trumps Reason in German Israeli Scientific Collaborations

Yair, Gad

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version  
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Zur Verfügung gestellt in Kooperation mit / provided in cooperation with:  
GESIS - Leibniz-Institut für Sozialwissenschaften

#### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Yair, G. (2020). The Uncanny: How Cultural Trauma Trumps Reason in German Israeli Scientific Collaborations. *Historical Social Research*, 45(1), 87-102. <https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.45.2020.1.87-102>

#### Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY Lizenz (Namensnennung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier:  
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/deed.de>

#### Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY Licence (Attribution). For more Information see:  
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>

---

# The Uncanny: How Cultural Trauma Trumps Reason in German Israeli Scientific Collaborations

Gad Yair\*

---

**Abstract:** »Das Unheimliche: Wie das kulturelle Trauma in deutsch-israelischen wissenschaftlichen Kooperationen die Vernunft übersteigt«. Twenty years after the Holocaust, Germany and Israel signed contracts for scientific collaborations. Fifty years later, those collaborations have become an asset for science in both countries. Notwithstanding those win-win collaborations, the trauma of the Holocaust still casts a long shadow over them, creating uncanny experiences and fear. This paper reports findings from interviews with 125 Israeli scientists who have collaborated with German colleagues. It employs Freud's analysis of the uncanny, an experience which mixes cozy familiarity with a sense of eeriness, confronting subjects with unconscious, repressed personal impulses or memories. The paper extends Freud's analyses by showing that uncanny experiences may result from a cultural – rather than a personal – trauma. Specifically, the results show that while Israeli scientists enjoy their collaborations with German colleagues, they occasionally experience fear and unease in their presence. Some identify Nazi mnemonics, others report on uncanny moments in their partners' homes. Those uncanny experiences appear among young and old scientists alike, suggesting that their scientific reason is captive of the cultural trauma of the Holocaust. I conclude by pointing that Israeli scientists are captives of their national trauma just as ordinary people are. Their reason proves to be a weak counterforce in mitigating the eruption of repressed emotions generated by the cultural trauma of the Holocaust.

**Keywords:** Cultural Trauma, Holocaust, Israeli Science, Germany.

---

## 1. Introduction

In 2015, Israel and Germany celebrated 50 years of diplomatic relations. The festive events also marked 70 years from the end of the Second World War and the Holocaust. When President Adenauer and Prime Minister Ben-Gurion signed those agreements in 1965, scientists were already visiting across the borders and launching collaborative research projects. Nevertheless, those relations required the two countries to contain collective emotions of shame, guilt, and spiteful anger. The collective trauma on both sides required emotion

---

\* Gad Yair, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Mount Scopus, Jerusalem 91905, Israel; gad.yair@mail.huji.ac.il.

management and psychic repression, especially as German perpetrators were still in office and Israeli victims still alive.

The 2015 events signaled that the scientific bridge between Israel and Germany is strong and productive. There are joint research projects across the disciplines. Scientists arrange mutual visits and sponsor student exchanges and there are joint conferences, publications, and research teams. Those strong collaborations suggest that the horrors of the past – and the lingering cultural trauma of the Holocaust – have receded. This was clearly the scene during the celebrations. German and Israeli scientists congratulated their scientific collaborations and pointed to their friendly and amicable relations. German scientists said they enjoy Israeli informality, Israeli scientists said they feel at home. The need for repression seemed to have become obsolete.

This was not wholly true for the Israeli partners. As the following study exposes, the trauma of the Holocaust still haunts Israeli scholars – but does so through cultural means. The findings show that while they enjoy German funding and the opportunity to expand their research networks, Israeli scientists still feel unease in Germany. Some talk of haunting shadows from the past, others are frightened by German customs. Some even say they experience an eerie feeling in Germany. They enjoy Germany, but familiarity and coziness come with silent anxieties. Their emotional ambivalence suggests that Israeli scientists experience the emotional state that Freud described as “the uncanny” (*unheimlich*). For Freud, the uncanny is an experience of the familiar (e.g., the home, the homey) mixed with a sense of eeriness or anxiety (Freud 1919). Uncanny experiences confront individuals with unconscious, repressed impulses, or with subdued personal traumatic memories. Indeed, even 70 years after the defeat of the Nazis – respondents still feel unease in Germany. Scientists of the third generation of scientific collaborations still testify that German sites and behaviours produce uncanny and unnerving experiences. The paper concludes, therefore, that the Israeli scientific reason – rational and scientifically advanced as it can be – is nonetheless captive to the deeper Israeli cultural trauma of the Holocaust.

The paper focuses on those uncanny shadows and argues that Israeli scientists are Israeli first, while scientists second. Their fearful national habitus overrules their scientific rationality. Like other Israelis, the scientists are hypersensitive for German sights and sounds (Yair 2015c). The results show that underneath the cerebral excellence of Israeli scientists beats a culturally-produced, traumatized, and suspicious heart. This fearful heart sensitizes their perceptions for perceiving Nazi paraphernalia and interpreting traditional German habits as Nazi traits. Indeed, such traces provide them a glimpse into the Nazi past while returning repressed fears into consciousness. Though they try to avoid the traces of the Third Reich when working in German laboratories and institutes they nevertheless stumble upon them. Even when focusing on scientific work, the German past invades their consciousness and brings re-

pressed memories into the open. For Israelis and Israeli scientists alike, Germany and the Germans are still uncanny (Yair 2015c). Notwithstanding their successes, the trauma of the Holocaust still casts a long shadow over scientific collaborations between Germany and Israel.

---

## 2. A Cultural Extension of Freud's Concept of the Uncanny

---

In his essay on the uncanny, Freud reviewed various phenomena which produce the unique combination of the familiar with the horrifying (Freud 1919). He analyzed stories that employed literary means for creating this sense of uncanniness. After surveying the field, Freud came to an analytic conclusion, declaring that:

If psychoanalytic theory is correct in maintaining that every emotional affect, whatever its quality, is transformed by repression into morbid anxiety, then among such cases of anxiety there must be a class in which the anxiety can be shown to come from something repressed which recurs. This class of morbid anxiety would then be no other than what is uncanny, irrespective of whether it originally aroused dread or some other affect. (ibid., 13)

According to this insight, an uncanny experience brings into consciousness a repressed emotion or memory. Since the recurrence or the reappearance of the repressed takes place in an otherwise unthreatening context, it produces confusion and ambivalence. The return of repressed memories in cozy settings startles individuals and leads them to withdrawal. Freud suggested that individuals suddenly suspect that unseen and threatening powers are nearby. As he expanded, “An uncanny effect is often and easily produced by effacing the distinction between imagination and reality, such as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality, or when a symbol takes over the full functions and significance of the thing it symbolizes” (ibid., 15). Freud suspected that uncanny situations lower the rational guards on consciousness (“surely there are no ghosts...”) while arousing infantile thought processes (“but I’m so afraid in this darkness, this place is haunted”).

The present paper applies Freud’s insights in order to interpret the uncanny experiences of Israeli scientists in Germany. However, instead of his psychoanalytic approach, it takes a cultural one (Eyerman, Alexander, and Breese 2011; Alexander 2012). It suggests that uncanny experiences of Israeli scientists in Germany result from the reappearance of memories of Nazi behaviours in casual situations. The return of such repressed memories – or the reappearance of Nazi customs, language, or symbols in contemporary Germany – creates eerie experiences for Israelis, who rationally trust the past to have long gone. Indeed, Israeli scientists rationally know that they visit a new Germany. They repress the past and trust their partners to be truly unrelated to their forebears. They allege that their German colleagues are friendly, decent, and liberal indi-

viduals. However, when traumatizing memories from the Third Reich reappear their repressed fearful emotions erupt. When they find themselves entangled in hierarchical customs or find Nazi paraphernalia in their colleagues' homes, the Nazi ghosts resurface. At those uncanny moments, all they seek is to go home, back to Israel.

---

### 3. The Israeli Cultural Trauma

---

The present study continues a series of comparative investigations into the encounter between German and Israeli culture (Yair 2015a; Yair 2015c). Prior investigations exposed that the Israeli national habitus is formed around a series of cultural traumas that constantly produce a sense of existential anxiety (Yair and Akbari 2014; Plotkin-Amrami and Brunner 2015; Yair 2015b). They have found that the German-Israeli encounter produces anxiety amongst Israelis, even among those who have lived in Germany for decades (Yair 2015c). They have shown, in that respect, that the Holocaust is a pivotal component of the Israeli collective identity (Schuman, Vinitzky-Seroussi, and Vinokur 2003; Klar, Schori-Eyal, and Klar 2013). Besides yearly participation in national memorials for the Holocaust, Israelis are reminded it almost on a daily basis – even in humour (Zerubavel 1995; Resnik 2003; Lomsky-Feder 2004; Kidron 2010). Either way, it is always part of the Israeli habitus, lurking in sub-consciousness. Israelis are socially-conditioned to think and experience the world through the prism of the Holocaust. It constitutes their sub-conscious and lurks in their durable dispositions. The anxiety that a possible return of the Holocaust is apparent in all echelons of Israeli society from its political leaders down to the lay public. Scientists, it turns out, are no different.

---

### 4. The Study

---

The present study focuses on the most educated people in Israel, namely, the top scientists whose intellectual achievements are recognized and celebrated. I interviewed 125 Israeli scientists who had collaborated with German colleagues or who studied for their PhD or carried out post-doctoral research in Germany. I selected interviewees from lists of awardees that the German-Israeli Foundation (GIF) provided for the years 2010-2013. I reached other interviewees through snowball contacts. Most scientists agreed to be interviewed and gave consent for the interviews to be recorded. The final sample has the following characteristics: 71 per cent are male, 95 per cent are employed in Israeli universities (5 in Germany). 42 per cent are from the Hebrew University, 10 per cent from each of the other institutes (with the exception of Haifa university which has only two interviewees in the sample). Discipline-

wise, 44 per cent are from the life and physical sciences, 24 per cent from the humanities, and 18 per cent from the social sciences. Medicine (7 per cent) and Engineering (5 per cent) complete the list. The interviews were mostly carried out in scientists' laboratories and offices. They were later transcribed and coded using *Atlas.ti*, a software for qualitative analysis.

Collaborations brought Israeli scientists for visits in German institutes. They also created a context for close and sometimes friendly relations with German colleagues. While I focused the interviews on questions about scientific reason, intellectual styles, and laboratory practices, the shadows of the past kept creeping into the conversations. Those shadows stand at the centre of the following analyses.

---

## 5. Results

---

I present the results in three sections. I begin by providing evidence for uncanny experiences among Israeli scientists working in Germany or visiting there. This section explores how the Nazi past surfaces in unsuspected circumstances and exposes the emotions to repressed memories related to the Nazi period. The second section details the general circumstances that bring up those repressed memories. The third section looks into the amicable relations between German and Israeli scientists and exposes an uncanny element in those as well. The latter two sections suggest that Israeli scientists feel that, at times, the Third Reich haunts the New Germany. It does so because they actually observe traces of Nazi "ghosts." The discussion wraps up the findings and returns to the analytic insights that a cultural reading of Freud's uncanny provides.

---

## 6. Uncanny Experiences in Contemporary Germany

---

Uncanny German moments: Trains. Shouts of "Achtung!" The German language. Old scientists. People who seem like Himmler's or Eichmann's doubles. Snow and road signs pointing toward *Dachau*. Conferences in *Villa Wannsee* and side notes about Jews. Also uncanny is Nazi paraphernalia in their hosts' homes, or photographs of family members dressed with SS uniforms. This much is clear: the visit of Israeli scientists to Germany and their collegial, homey and cozy relations there at times bring into view the ghosts of Nazi Germany. Scientists of the second generation recounted such uncanny moments, but younger scientists from the third and the fourth generation reported similar experiences. Moreover, scientists who had no family victims in the Holocaust also testified about uncanny moments. The evidence is overwhelming, indeed. Eighty percent of the interviewees had one story or another, and most of those stories had an uncanny element to them.

Some interviewees reported that their family fled Germany before World War II, but that their parents had no qualms about Germany. Nevertheless, their visit to Germany was full of emotional surprises. As a psychologist whose father already collaborated with German colleagues reported: “I didn’t think that I have a troubled ‘thing’ with Germany, but it proved very difficult for me to be there [...] I had way more problems than I expected. I was really surprised by my emotions. I was unprepared for them.” A sociologist with a series of collaborations with German colleagues was also surprised by her reactions, especially since she had no direct “Holocaust story” in her family.

Maybe it’s my emotional scratch. I’ll begin by saying that in my family there are no shadows of the Holocaust, but as an Israeli – you are [emotionally scratched]. Boots. The sounds of boots on pavements startle me when I’m there, and trains startle me. I mean, I cannot but think about that [...]. While driving there I think about those forests and how they could live there and survive, because it is so wet and cold now. And hiding another winter, and another winter. This is an Israeli emotional scratch.

This “emotional scratch” results from the cultural trauma of the Holocaust. As prior investigations indicated, this trauma is engraved in Israeli psyches and senses (Yair 2015c). This habituated trauma directed interviewees to look for hidden signs of the Nazi past. It drove them to listen carefully to Germany’s sub-sonic sounds. As the evidence suggests, respondents do not project on Germany their fantastic fears. Rather, the respondents had actually encountered Nazi icons and sounds that prompted repressed fears to resurface. It was during unsuspecting moments that they felt Germany to be uncanny. As a cancer researcher said, the “Israeli scratch” is part of a national DNA.

In Germany, every person beyond 70 – you look at him with suspicion. I remember the airport in Frankfurt, there are security cameras and they separate the Israelis from other travelers. There were times that we had to be in what I called the cage, before boarding the airplane; we had to walk through a corridor... with armed soldiers. And I always felt that they are about to shout at us: “Schnell, Schnell”. Where does it come from? I was never there [...] I was not [...] It is as if it is in our DNA. Simply amazing.

The Israeli post-traumatic habitus is trained by socialization and education. It is trained to look for signs of the past in the present. Repeated screening of films on the horrors of the Third Reich creates subliminal sediments of sights and sounds that make it easy for interviewees to appreciate how much of old Germany remained in the new one. A casual stroll by the Bundestag reminds them of Hitler, and visits to Synagogues bring into view iconic visions of *Kristallnacht*. The hypersensitivity to such iconic images and sub-sonic sounds sensitizes Israelis to perceive traces of Nazis. In some mysterious manner, they sometimes feel that the perpetrators are still around. Another cancer researcher reported such an uncanny experience.

During my first visit to Berlin I went first thing in the morning to the victory tower, the *Siegessäule*, the 17th of June road toward Brandenburg Gate, where

they used to make the Nazi marches, and all those famous pictures. It was really early, 6.00 am. It was quiet... But what I heard in my ears and saw with my eyes were those marches from the movies [...]. Come what may, you always look at this place through those eyeglasses.

Berlin, indeed, is filled with mnemonics of the Third Reich. Many interviewees spoke about the *Stolperstein*, a small street stone made of copper set in front of old buildings, stating: Here lived such and such, was taken to [whatever camp] in 194x, murdered in 194x. Hence, during casual strolls in German cities one frequents the *Stolperstein*. As Israeli scientists declared, those mnemonics of the Holocaust achieve their aim: they immediately bring back the past. They bring sadness and a sense of mourning in the midst of unsuspecting strolls. Other memorials for the Third Reich create uncanny experiences as well. As a senior humanities scholar reported, his hotel entrance was near to Adolf Eichmann's former office.

The hotel, ironically, was exactly – I forgot the Nazi name of that office – it was Eichmann's office [...]. There is a bus stop outside with the pictures of Eichmann [and a saying: Never Forget...]. Yes, there are two pictures of Eichmann, such memories... The first thing that hit me was this bus station. I mean, this is a classic experience of Berlin [...]. I don't know, to host Israelis exactly there (laughs). I don't know. So yes, sometime I have this "How German!"

A young historian who studied in Munich for five years told how uncanny it was having Dachau's presence nearby.

Each time you ride the train on Dachau's line – that's horrible. It is absolutely horrible. And one of the students resided in Dachau, it was terrible. We once traveled to a big music festival in Dachau, and we took the train. You reach the station, and on one side you have a music festival, on the other a concentration camp. You say to yourself: "What am I doing here?" It was difficult.

Some of the experiences were seemingly uneventful yet still uncanny. A musicologist who spent a sabbatical in Berlin reported how a trivial kitchen item in the host's kitchen created a train of associations that ended up in the Holocaust:

It was a small container with the word "Zucker" (Sugar). We had the same item at home. My grandmother brought it from Germany in the thirties and they still produce it here. This place, it has a *heimische* element to it, in Freud's term of the uncanny. There is an uncanny presence here. Some hole was created in Being here, in existence. Something can be very homey, but at the same time it is so *unheimlich* [German in the original].

A psychologist also pointed to mundane yet uncanny situations: "It is exactly when you stand in those beautiful German neighborhoods. And beautiful people. And everything is so beautiful. And you stand there, and it makes you realize [how it could have happened...]. It is very frightening. This is an awful message."

A Philosopher agreed that there is an uncanny feeling in Germany to the extent that she decided to never visit there again. "There are vibrations in the air,



and although I met scholars from the Max Planck institute, and everything was cosmopolitan, super-friendly, people of culture and art and music and architecture – but still something in me said ‘nothing has changed.’” A physicist supplemented this claim in an attempt to explain the uncanny presence of the Holocaust. As he said, “It is in the air.” A cancer researcher also admitted that the past always intrudes into the present, even when having good collegial relations. “It has a decisive effect. I cannot ignore this thing. There is familiarity here [...] but many times I think: Where is it coded?” Another physicist agreed that while he has true friends in Germany, “A picture arises, yes. Somehow, the German-Jewish encounter always has a very complex thing to it. I don’t know where it comes from.” The philosopher made another attempt to explain the uncanny *Stimmung* (mood, feeling, or atmosphere) in Germany:

It is those concrete things. The pavement with the *Stolperstein* that you need to beware not to step on, not to step on those small gravestones with the names on them. Or you go to a public park, to sit and eat a sandwich. And there was this statue of a table with two chairs, with one of them upside down on the ground. That’s it. One standing, the other on the ground. It was obvious that it’s tied [to the Holocaust]. I later saw the text and it was a very difficult statue. It had nothing to it, but I could not withstand it [...] so it is there. I felt I cannot escape this. I then saw in every building the previous residents and I was fully into it. You cannot avoid it. We have a plan for a research visit next year. I will fly for a day and return the day after.

The uncanny atmosphere invades the Israeli consciousness even at the most pleasant places. The return of repressed memories or fears – or the negation of wishful expectations about the new Germany – confuse and scare even the most rational scientists. When they plan to enjoy Berlin’s delights, they suddenly encounter its blackness. As the philosopher reported, indeed, she had planned to visit many cultural centres in Berlin. However, the presence of the Holocaust was “Stronger than me. I had a list of galleries, Jazz clubs and restaurants – and I didn’t go to most of them. It is undoubtedly stronger than me. Simply, the presence [of the Holocaust] is there.” As a chemist concluded, “Berlin makes you angry. It drives you crazy because it is a city with an unbearable Nazi weight, but on the other hand, it is a cozy and pleasant city, and it’s nice to hang out there. This dichotomy just drives you crazy non-stop. How can it be so nice and cozy if that is what we have in its background?”

---

## 7. Mnemonics of Nazi Germany

---

The Israeli post-traumatic habitus is constituted by media-mediated memories of the Holocaust. Those memories are not transferred from generation to generation by parental socialization. Rather, yearly national memorials create those memories of victimization by broadcasting movies solely devoted to the Holocaust. Those cultural experiences are accompanied by mandatory history les-

sons in school. Furthermore, during their mandatory army service, Israeli soldiers also frequent national Holocaust memorials where Israel is justified as the home for the Jewish people. Those repeated messages create a strong standing of “Never Again,” but they also create learned victimization and fear of Germany. Those habituated memories sensitize Israeli scientists visiting Germany to perceive Nazi ghosts. Their sensitivity to those ghosts – and the latter’s surprising presence there – create many uncanny moments.

Some of those ghosts are surreal, others are real. Snow is an example for the surreal. The sight of snow in Germany – and in Poland, but rarely elsewhere – brings to mind repressed or subdued memories of Jews hiding in the forests. Clearly, there is nothing in German snow that is logically or normatively associated with the Third Reich. However, movies and repeated testimonies about survival in snowy and cold conditions provide the Israeli habitus with a key symbol of the Holocaust (Ortner 1973).

Somewhat less surreal is the association that respondents make between trains and the Holocaust. Israeli Holocaust memorials exhibit train cabins that the Nazis used for transportation to labour and death camps; films from that period depict the complex transportation system that German rails provided for the Final Solution. Those recurrent images and sounds habituate Israelis to be highly sensitive to the sound of trains in Germany. A researcher in social work, for example, said that she suffered an anxiety attack in a German train. “Two policemen came and arrested someone. They questioned someone and arrested him, with dogs. I stood holding my suitcase at the door for an hour and a half. It was Holocaust Memorial Day, and we are a bereaved family, so I panicked. [Why did you stand by the door?] I thought they were coming to take me.” Other uncanny experiences – less intense, admittedly – recurred. A psychologist reported that his first visits to Germany were strange: “To hear the language in the context and in train stations, all those symbols were creepy.” An Islam scholar reported about her first visit to East Germany: “It was winter, and you stand on the platform of the train, your bones shiver. It is an unpleasant experience.” A chemist also reported about his first visit to Germany: “I remember standing on the platform and hearing the call ‘*Achtung!*’ I simply wanted to die on the spot. It was awful.”

The interviewees also admitted that they have “a thing” with old people. Greying hair is an immediate call to arms, figuratively speaking. In meeting old people on the street – or during scientific meetings where senior German scientists appear – Israeli scientists cannot evade their post-traumatic national habitus. As a biologist admitted: “When you meet a scientist older than 70 you immediately ask: ‘What have you done? Or what did your parents and grandparents do?’ All of us think that way all the time.” Indeed, the Israeli habitus orients ears and eyes to search for Nazis. As a musicologist reported, she visited a concert but her attention was transfixed on an old man: “In front of me sat a seventy years old German, I guess he was born around 1920 [...]

and he was so pleased. So I told myself – “he sits like that, probably he sat like that when he was eighteen, and maybe he heard it then.” It was an uncanny moment.” Veteran Israeli scientists who had collaborations with German colleagues as early as the 1960s reported to actually look for Nazis. As a physicist said: “Have you heard about Albert Speer? He was released from jail in 1966, and I thought that were I to meet him on the street I will jump on him, or when he would talk to me, I don't know what I'll do.” A scholar of religions said that those uncanny moments died with the Nazis: “When I first traveled to Germany, I had real difficulty to see old people. I mean, there were those peculiar moments. But those people have mostly died. They died.” Though mostly dead, indeed, Israeli scientists visiting, studying, or working in Germany are still habituated for suspicion and fear. They are therefore predisposed to meet Nazi ghosts and experience uncanny moments.

Interviewees reported that there were moments when those supposedly dead were actually alive. Some real and uncanny experiences happened when they came into neo-Nazi demonstrations or met neo-Nazis face-to-face. As a medical researcher reported, “I got stuck in a neo-Nazi demonstration. I stood and stared at them – as no one pulled me away from there [as in prior events] – and it made me feel bad, it totally shook me.” A historian – who said that “The Holocaust is always there” – reported that his studies of Jewish cemeteries often resulted in his finding neo-Nazi sabotage of the places he frequented. As recent elections in Germany suggest, not all Nazis are gone. This is why Israeli scientists find those encounters with those “living dead” to be so uncanny.

---

## 8. Academic and Collegial Uncanny Moments

---

The experiences cited above have limited consequences for the scientific collaboration between Israeli and German scientists. They are uncanny and troubling yet do not impinge on scientific work. However, there are situations where the boundaries between science and personal experience are shaken, to the detriment of collaboration. Indeed, some academic situations and some collegial relations have strained the tender Israeli repression of the Nazi past. In those situations, the experience of uncanny ghosts in academia bewilders Israeli scientists. They either have to increase efforts at repressing their emotions, or to let go of opportunities for collaboration. The following examples range from unintended academic consequences to non-emphatic situations created by German colleagues and friends.

The long quote below describes a non-personal academic context. It provides a clear rendition of Freud's description of the uncanny as the transformation of the homiest place into a threatening situation. A senior Israeli scholar was awarded a year at the *Wissenschaftskolleg*, Berlin's center for advanced study. It is the best place for serious work, interviewees admitted, and the place

is perfect. The scholar simply wanted to read a classic book. Surprisingly, the librarian handed him a Nazi ghost.

They have an amazing team in the library. In a day or two you get any book in the world, they are amazing [...]. So I thought, I'm here in Berlin, I'll read something classic, a German positivist historiography of the nineteenth century, to get a taste [...]. So I ordered the biography of Alexander the Great. In two days I get the book and go to my room. You know, it's Grunewald, very cozy, *gemütlich*, green windows into the woods, the special light. It's a beautiful place. I sit in my armchair and open the book. What do I see? I see it was printed in Grunewald in 1942, autumn of 1942. Exactly when they decided on the Final Solution. OK, that alone was unpleasant. But then I see that the publisher wrote an introduction to explain why it is necessary to re-print this biography, which was probably written fifty years earlier. The publisher, probably a man of culture, a civilized person, wrote that there should be a new edition because the Greeks and the Romans understood that life is a struggle, and that the strong must exterminate the weak, and that the German people must enlist to that mission. It's typed in German, Gothic letters. I love books, you know. So I read this, 1942, and I became ill. For days – and I was not new to Germany – so for days I walked around in shock. I thought that everything is filled with poison, with venom. The trees, the leaves, the streets, the ground. Everything felt soaked with some horrible poison, and I only wanted to go back to Israel. Truth is, I only wanted to go back home.

Unintended uncanny circumstances may happen when working with a German colleague individually or in groups. The latter can take place during seminars or laboratory work. A young physicist told, for example, that his host, a senior professor, walked into the elevator with him and suddenly said that his father was a submarine sailor in World War II. "I felt very unpleasant," he said and added: "I didn't know what to do with this information. I didn't answer." Such moments of disclosure were quite common. They sometimes released tension on the German side – with tears and crying – but they inadvertently produced uncanny moments. A biologist reported that his German colleague came with a confession at the end of a conference: "He came to me and started crying that his grandfather was a Nazi, and that it's so difficult for him that he has to share it with me." A young historian reported on a similar event: "I worked on some stuff and I contacted someone to take me on a tour. I told him about my grandmother, so he suddenly stopped and said: 'I have to tell you something. My father was a Nazi, he was a child, but he had Hitler's statute at home.' We both started crying, it was very difficult." Such reports oftentimes end with the classic response to uncanny situations: Silence, embarrassment, and emotional disconnection.

As Freud suggested, such uncanny moments happen when most unexpected. They mostly transpire when people are emotionally unguarded. Uncanny moments arise when people are in relaxed contexts, for instance, with beer and laughter. A psychologist, for example, reported that at the end of a conference she went with her colleague to a friendly dinner. "He asked me [about my

family] and I suddenly realized that they are all German. And I had this moment of insight, and I felt my grandfather [who was German], I admit, and I thought about their grandparents. And I wondered what would have been the relationship, what would have happened if [there was no Holocaust].” As she later said, those were unpleasant moments. A neurobiologist reported that his uncanny experience transpired during Oktoberfest, in the midst of the festival, with beer and song.

We went to the market together to drink beer. And we sat on those long benches along tables with beers, and were amazed by their ability to take five or six litres of beer [...]. We indulged in their sausages; it was all beautiful and happy, the beer was excellent, of course. But after a fourth cup, at the next table they began to sing and knock with those glasses on the table. I had shivers. Because it is a German song within me, both emotionally and culturally, it is connected to Dachau, five kilometers away. I could not. I wanted to vomit all this beer and we got up and left.

Some interviewees admitted – notwithstanding the reports above – that they truly have friendly relations with their colleagues. They congratulated themselves for having Germans as friends, suggesting that there is some “mental match” between the two cultures. However, those friendly relations have not protected respondents from uncanny moments too. Indeed, a few interviewees reported that their German partners attempted to be as friendly as possible. The families met, there were sleepovers, and repeated invitations to visit home. In some of those amicable contexts, however, their colleagues unintentionally created moments they described as uncanny. In those moments the Nazi ghosts appeared, with uniform, weapon, Swastika, and all their meaning. Those mnemonics of the Third Reich sat on their hosts’ table, or decorated their living room. In those most unsuspecting and unguarded moments, the Nazi past raised its head, hitting Israeli scientists in the soft spot of their cultural trauma.

A physicist had many years of effective and friendly collaboration with his German colleague. They visited each other’s laboratory and had pleasant personal relations until the Israeli scientist was invited to his colleague’s home for breakfast.

I arrived Sunday morning for breakfast. We sat in the living room and I observed a portrait of someone with an SS uniform. So I asked: “Who is it?” “It is my grandfather,” he replied. “Oh [...] what was he?” “He was the Mayor.” “Was he? So he was in the SS?” “Yes, that was the case.” OK. What could I do? I didn’t ask anything. But then he said: “I cannot throw it away.” I understand why he cannot throw it, but why put a picture of him dressed in SS uniform?

After breakfast the colleague invited the Israeli scientist for an exhibit on Wagner and the Jews, to see how rampant anti-Semitism was in Germany even before Hitler. Ever since that uncanny encounter the thoughts about his German partner never faded: What does he really think about Jews? An Engineer had a similar experience. However, he met the real thing.

My partner was older than me and we hadn't met before. We met through a go-between. I came over there and he hosted me very nicely, we spent a whole week together writing a research proposal. Toward the end of the week I told him: "Look, I rented a car and I only go back to Israel on Sunday, so I want to travel a bit... Tell me, where should I go?" So he more or less said, "Nuremberg, you have to visit there, it is not as it used to be." So he saw that I raised my head and continued: "Listen, Nuremberg is not [...]. I served in Nuremberg as a soldier." So I think to myself, "So, my first visit to Germany, my first time writing a research proposal with a German scientist, all I need on my head is a Nazi soldier. How the hell did I get here?"

---

## 9. Discussion: Taking Stock, Taking a Breath

---

German-Israeli scientific collaborations produce uncanny moments. I could have written "still produce," but the evidence suggests that even young scholars, or those having no family connection to the Holocaust, are still dumfounded in their first encounters in Germany. This common outcome is socially – and culturally – produced. The Israeli cultural trauma inculcates existential anxiety as a learned outcome. It creates a socialized disposition that sensitizes Israelis to look for Nazi ghosts and identify them. This is why we found so many anecdotes about uncanny moments; but this is also why many of them are similar. There are typical uncanny moments (e.g., trains, words, iconic symbols), but there are also German cultural practices that frighten respondents (e.g., non-emotional, non-emphatic hierarchical relations). The Israeli habitus connects such seemingly unconnected moments and cultural customs to the Nazi past, as they constitute symbolic road signs in the hidden map of a subliminal Nazi Germany.

So are those uncanny moments but projections from an existentially insecure national habitus? Partly. But partly not. While there are myriad testimonies about the "New Germany," with its human rights-oriented constitution and its openness to refugees, the evidence still testifies to cultural continuity. The "Zero-Hour" (*Null Stunde*) has neither erased pre-war German culture nor has it made for a new re-start for the German national habitus (Dumont 1986; Elias 1996). Germans, it is true, might hardly see this cultural continuity; and they may be hard pressed to appreciate that some of their cultural practices were also applicable during the Third Reich. But while they might be oblivious to this frightening cultural continuity; the Israelis are not.

However, the evidence does not suggest that Israeli scientists sit frozen by fear in German labs. As some of the quotes above intimated, uncanny experiences occur during scientists' first visits to Germany. They also recur in rather homey conditions. But eventually, they reported, they got used to seeing Nazi ghosts. They got used to seeing them because they still stumble upon Nazi traces, and because the latter still find ways to startle Israelis by the return of

the repressed. However, the emotional shock subsides. The scientists learnt to contain their fear in uncanny moments; they got used to “passing through” moments of embarrassment and surprise (Goffman 1961). They are quick to understand the affinity with the Nazi past, but compartmentalize the experience. The more they visited Germany, the quicker their uncanny moments receded into the background. They never fully dissipated, interviewees acknowledged, but they got used to seeing Nazi ghosts. As a psychologist summed this up: “The feeling of rejection and unease that this place and language create, well, I got used to it. You can say that, but there were uncanny moments. It was not an easy experience to go there initially.” But although they “got used” to Nazi ghosts and reported on a kind of normalcy in Germany, the return back home to Israel provided an emotional relief. As a musicologist reported after returning from a sabbatical in Germany, “After a week or two in Jerusalem I suddenly felt that a heavy distress was lifted off me. It didn’t matter how much I enjoyed there, because it [the Nazi past] was always part of my consciousness.” As another one said, “There’s always something troubling in Germany.”

The present study attempted to advance Freud’s brilliant analysis of the uncanny. For Freud, uncanny moments transpire when repressed fearful personal memories suddenly arise into consciousness in unsuspecting circumstances that otherwise provide for a homey experience. The present study went beyond this description by using the theory of cultural trauma and the national habitus. It has shown that repressed memories are at times culturally produced. Pains of victimhood are at times implanted in a national habitus by school curricula, media reports, and national ceremonies, thereby producing vicarious, mediated experiences that – when arising from the depths of consciousness – produce similar effects as if subjects were real victims. Cultural processes eternalize victimhood by making it into a collective memory, a national habitus (Edkins 2003; Kuipers 2013).

It is culture, therefore, which explains the Israeli sensitivity towards snow, trains, old people, and the German language when spoken aloud. The Israeli cultural trauma sensitizes Israeli senses to the experience of Nazi ghosts, and it creates vigilance and suspicion towards seemingly unrelated German objects or customs (Yair 2015c). Uncanny experiences, in that sense, do not necessarily spring from repressed personal experiences. Rather, cultural traumas can also create mental and emotional maps that direct individuals at some subconscious level to look for traces of the past. They form a cultural toolkit that works in the dark (Swidler 1986). When hints of troubling circumstances arise, those cultural tools and predispositions erupt into consciousness, thereby creating uncanny experiences.

As this exegesis suggests, there are fruitful bridges to be erected between cultural analysts and psychoanalysts (Yair 2017). In some fashion, such previous fruitful endeavours which centered on the concepts of “national character”

and “culture and personality” have been severed (Martindale 1967). With new understandings on both sides of the divide, it is high time to re-create a more culturally sensitive psychology as well as a more psychoanalytically sensitive sociology. If worked from both sides, this new intellectual bridge may hold promise for new fascinating studies of the interplay between states, cultures, and human emotion.

---

## References

---

- Alexander, Jeffrey C. 2012. *Trauma: A Social Theory*. Malden, MA: Polity.
- Dumont, Louis. 1986. Are Cultures Living Beings? German Identity in Interaction. *Man* 21 (4): 587-604.
- Edkins, Jenny. 2003. *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Elias, Norbert. 1996. *The Germans: Power Struggles and the Development of Habitus in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Eyerman, Ron, Jeffrey C. Alexander, and Elizabeth B. Breese. 2011. *Narrating Trauma: On the Impact of Collective Suffering*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers.
- Freud, Sigmund. 1919. The Uncanny, trans. Alix Starchy. *Imago*, 1-21.
- Goffman, Erving. 1961. *Encounters: Two Studies in the Sociology of Interaction*. New York: Bobbs-Merrill.
- Kidron, Carol A. 2010. Embracing the Lived Memory of Genocide: Holocaust Survivor and Descendant Renegade Memory Work at the House of Being. *American Ethnologist* 37 (3): 429-451.
- Klar, Yechiel, Noa Schori-Eyal, and Yonat Klar. 2013. The ‘Never Again’ State of Israel: The Emergence of the Holocaust as a Core Feature of Israeli Identity and Its Four Incongruent Voices. *Journal of Social Issues* 69 (1): 125-143.
- Kuipers, Giseline. 2013. The Rise and Decline of National Habitus: Dutch Cycling Culture and the Shaping of National Similarity. *European Journal of Social Theory* 16 (1): 17-35. doi: 10.1177/1368431012437482.
- Lomsky-Feder, Edna. 2004. The Memorial Ceremony in Israeli Schools: Between the State and Civil Society. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 25 (3): 291-305.
- Martindale, Don. 1967. The Sociology of National Character. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 370: 30-35.
- Ortner, Sherry B. 1973. On Key Symbols. *American Anthropologist* 75 (5): 1338-1346. doi: 10.1525/aa.1973.75.5.02a00100.
- Plotkin-Amrami, Galia, and José Brunner. 2015. Making up ‘National Trauma’ in Israel: From Collective Identity to Collective Vulnerability. *Social Studies of Science* 45 (4): 525-545. doi:10.1177/0306312715589846.
- Resnik, Julia. 2003. Sites of Memory of the Holocaust: Shaping National Memory in the Education System in Israel. *Nations and Nationalism* 9 (2): 297-317.
- Schuman, Howard, Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi, and Amiram D. Vinokur. 2003. Keeping the Past Alive: Memories of Israeli Jews at the Turn of the Millennium. *Sociological Forum* 18 (1): 103-136.



- Swidler, Ann. 1986. Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies. *American Sociological Review* 51 (2): 273. doi: 10.2307/2095521.
- Yair, Gad. 2015a. *Love Is Not Praktish: The Israeli Look at Germany*. Bnei B'rak: Ha'Kibbutz Hameuchad (Hebrew).
- Yair, Gad. 2015b. The Israeli Existential Anxiety: Cultural Trauma and the Constitution of National Character. *Social Identities* 20 (4-5): 346-362.
- Yair, Gad. 2015c. The Germans: Cultural Trauma and the Israeli Habitus. *American Journal of Cultural Sociology* 3 (2): 254-279. doi:10.1057/ajcs.2015.2.
- Yair, Gad. 2017. The National Habitus: Steps Towards Reintegrating Sociology and Group Analysis. In *The Social Unconscious in Persons, Groups, and Societies, Vol. 3: The Foundation Matrix Extended and Re-Configured*, 47-63. London: Karnac.
- Yair, Gad, and Behzad Akbari. 2014. From Cultural Trauma to Nuclear War? Interpreting the Iranian-Israeli Conflict. *Human Figurations* 3 (2).
- Zerubavel, Yael. 1995. *Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

# Historical Social Research

## Historische Sozialforschung

### All articles published in HSR Special Issue 45 (2020) 1: Emotion, Authority, and National Character.

Helmut Kuzmics, Dieter Reicher & Jason Hughes

State, Emotion, Authority, and National Habitus. State-Related Problems of Our Time and Methodological Discourses in SocioSlogy and Historical Sociology.

doi: [10.12759/hsr.45.2020.1.7-41](https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.45.2020.1.7-41)

Behrouz Alikhani

Processes of the State and Habitus Formation in Iran in the 19th and early 20th Centuries: The Socio- and Psychogenesis of the Constitutional Revolution in 1906.

doi: [10.12759/hsr.45.2020.1.42-64](https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.45.2020.1.42-64)

Onur Kınlı & İrem Özgören Kınlı

Is Every Turk Born a Soldier? A Historical-Processual Analysis.

doi: [10.12759/hsr.45.2020.1.65-86](https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.45.2020.1.65-86)

Gad Yair

The Uncanny: How Cultural Trauma Trumps Reason in German Israeli Scientific Collaborations.

doi: [10.12759/hsr.45.2020.1.87-102](https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.45.2020.1.87-102)

Nicolas Demertzis & Hara Stratoudaki

Greek Nationalism as a Case of Political Religion: Rituals and Sentimentality.

doi: [10.12759/hsr.45.2020.1.103-128](https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.45.2020.1.103-128)

Miklós Hadas

The Culture of Distrust. On the Hungarian National Habitus.

doi: [10.12759/hsr.45.2020.1.129-152](https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.45.2020.1.129-152)

Marta Bucholc

Schengen and the Rosary: Catholic Religion and the Postcolonial Syndrome in Polish National Habitus.

doi: [10.12759/hsr.45.2020.1.153-181](https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.45.2020.1.153-181)

Lars Bo Kaspersen

The Creation of Modern Denmark – A Figurational Analysis.

doi: [10.12759/hsr.45.2020.1.182-206](https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.45.2020.1.182-206)

Dieter Reicher

Nationalistic German Gymnastic Movements and Modern Sports. Culture between Identity and Habitus.

doi: [10.12759/hsr.45.2020.1.207-225](https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.45.2020.1.207-225)

Steven Loyal & Stephen Quilley

State Formation, Habitus, and National Character: Elias, Bourdieu, Polanyi, and Gellner and the Case of Asylum Seekers in Ireland.

doi: [10.12759/hsr.45.2020.1.226-261](https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.45.2020.1.226-261)

Michael Dunning & Jason Hughes

Power, Habitus, and National Character: The Figurational Dynamics of Brexit.

doi: [10.12759/hsr.45.2020.1.262-291](https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.45.2020.1.262-291)

Akira Ohira

The Sociological Analysis of Ekiden, Japan's Long-Distance Relay Road Race.

doi: [10.12759/hsr.45.2020.1.292-308](https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.45.2020.1.292-308)

Stephen Mennell

Power, Individualism, and Collective Self Perception in the USA.

doi: [10.12759/hsr.45.2020.1.309-329](https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.45.2020.1.309-329)

For further information on our journal, including tables of contents, article abstracts, and our extensive online archive, please visit <https://www.gesis.org/en/hsr>.